

An Interview with  
**Barbara Wilkinson**

at *The Historical Society of Missouri* St. Louis  
Research Center, St. Louis, Missouri

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**Oral History Program**

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## PREFACE

The interview was taped on a placed on a tripod. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [ ] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets [ ]. Any use of parentheses ( ) indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks ["" ] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [   ] indicates a proper title of a publication. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [   (??) ] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Josephine Sporleder.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk about your childhood, Barbara: your parents; your grandparents; your cousins; your siblings. With whom did you play? How did you play? Your elementary/secondary school experience. Was there a teacher that really said, "Barbara, you really have ability and you can do some things really very well" and encouraged you, and did your family encourage you to go to school, to get an education, to sort of chart your own course, more or less, in the world as the world will allow you to chart your course. So just talk about your youth.

Barbara Wilkinson: Sure. My mother and father grew up in Eastern Kentucky in the Appalachian Mountains and both came from what were small coal mining communities. I was actually born in Eastern Kentucky and, at a very early age, probably around four years old, my parents decided that there was more opportunity to be had outside of that environment and so when I look back, they made a very critical decision that was a significant point for me in my development, by packing up their family, leaving their family and all of their support network and moving to St. Louis, Missouri, a city that neither of them had ever visited but where there was a business opportunity for my father. So I consider myself a St. Louis native, although my roots go back to those early days in a small town in Eastern Kentucky. I still have fond memories of that environment because, of course, then in the summers, our family vacations were spent traveling back to visit grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins. So I feel that I have a pretty good sense of the difference that my life would have been had my parents not made that decision very early on in my life. I have one younger brother and so we grew up in St. Louis, went to elementary, all of our K-12 years were here in the St. Louis community. Early on in my elementary school days, there were...first of all, I had wonderful teachers the whole time and I think back to two in particular that really planted a seed that grew and developed and one of those was my 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. Before 4<sup>th</sup> grade started, she had spent a considerable time that summer traveling in Africa and of course, she brought wonderful pictures and stories about the animals and the culture and what it was like to be a part of a global community, not just the community here in St. Louis where we grew up and I think that really...as I said...fueled a desire in me, not only to travel throughout the United States, but to travel and see the rest of the world, which I've been able to do more recently in the past years and am now proud to say that, as of next year, I will have visited all seven continents and experienced many different cultures and people

and parts of the world that I never thought I would have had the opportunity to do. Also in elementary school...well, I should back up...my brother and I were, early on in the years of the baby boomers so my elementary school years were during the 1950's when what's today referred to as the "nuclear family" was pretty much the norm. My father worked; my mother was a stay-at-home mom, and was available to be the room mother and the Brownie leader and the Cub Scout leader for my brother and I. Academics was always a priority for my family and while we grew up with what I will say "meager means," in terms of financial resources, it was always very important for us as children to take advantage of what was offered educationally, academically. Our world of experience came from visits to the library, trips to the St. Louis Zoo and both my parents were musically talented and so music was a very important part of our family. So all of those things, I think, shaped both my brother and I so that all of us played musical instruments, were part of and enjoyed the performing arts. I remember my first trip to the Muny Opera as a child was to see *Annie Get Your Gun* and I thought, oh, how wonderful it would be to be a part of the orchestra, to be a part of the performers on stage, and again, that has been a life-long interest of mine: The St. Louis Symphony; the theater; the performing arts. That was reinforced as well with a couple of elementary school teachers, one in particular who was the instrumental music teacher and we had the opportunity, of course, as most children still do today, to learn to play a musical instrument as part of our public school education. Well, it just so happened that my music teacher was also a member of the St. Louis Symphony and she was very strict and preparation and practice were...if you hadn't practiced and didn't know the lessons for the week, you might as well not go to class because it was not going to be a pleasant experience for her or for me as the student. But I think through all of that, the encouragement to achieve, to be prepared, to do well in everything that you did really took hold and made, I think, such an impression on me that as I grew older and heard someone describe how you achieve success or what is success, it's when preparation meets opportunity. You can't control the opportunity but certainly it was my position to always be prepared and to make sure that I was as prepared as I could possibly be for whatever I wanted the next opportunity to be or whatever the next opportunity was that came along. In junior high, there was one particular teacher that made a very significant impact on me. It

was at the end of my 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, and then, of course, freshman in high school were part of the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum of junior high and we had yearbooks and it was always important to get your friends and even your teachers to write something in your yearbook at the end of the year that you could take on and reflect over and hopefully enjoy. Well, it was my French teacher and I don't even remember the context but the phrase that really hit home to me was, "So much untapped potential," and I thought, now, what does she really mean by that, because I had done well in her class. I had always been an Honor Roll student and had always gotten A's in French and I never went back to ask her about that comment but it was a wake-up call for me to say, what is she seeing in me that I don't see in myself that might, again, create even more opportunity to be successful, to achieve things that might not be on my radar screen. Even to this day, that comment bothers me, but yet, it, as I said, was a wake-up call, to say, maybe I can do more than what I think I'm even capable of doing. So, in high school, I went to a very large high school. My graduating class was over 1,000 people and in those days, if you were on, for example, the cheer squad, there was one cheer squad that was active for all the athletic events and today, what we see is opportunities open up. You could be a cheerleader for football; a cheerleader for basketball; a cheerleader for wrestling, and so being in a class that large and in a school that large, I had not yet developed, personally, that assertiveness or even, quite frankly, the self-confidence to say, I can do that, and step forward and put myself out there. So I was always very active in extracurricular activities as part of a group, helping to make a group be successful. I also participated in summer athletic activities through a softball team. So, the team experience and being a contributor to a team and helping the team to win or in instrumental music, to be as good a clarinet player as I could possibly be so that we did well at our competitions, was the framework in which I grew up. But I didn't really step out to try and be the president or vice president of the student council. That came a bit later. And, as I said, I think it really has to do with not necessarily not being encouraged, but not having yet developed that self-confidence that said, he or she can do that. I can do that too and maybe I can do it even a little better.

Blanche Touhill:

So, you were active and you were an integral part of the team but you weren't yet, like, the solo person?

Barbara Wilkinson: That's a fair assessment. Interestingly though, the solo parts came out, for example, in the musical performances where I would be the with the clarinet solo or I would be the one with the vocal solo, but again, that was, in my opinion, it was skill-based but it was also the confidence, to be able to do that and to perform and to perform well.

Blanche Touhill: Did the teacher ask you to be the solo performer? You didn't ask to be the solo performer?

Barbara Wilkinson: I didn't ask to be the solo performer but when it came to the try-outs, I always made sure that, again, I was as prepared as I could possibly be.

Blanche Touhill: And you took advantage of the opportunity?

Barbara Wilkinson: And I took advantage of the opportunity.

Blanche Touhill: So time comes for college. Did your parents say, "Barbara, I want you to go to college"?

Barbara Wilkinson: I think, as I look back, academic achievement and doing well in school and even the expectation that, of course she'll go to college, was always there. So it wasn't a question of, will I go to college; it was more, where will I go to college and what will I study, and I think that was very important because, even coming from the small community and challenging environment in which both of my parents grew up, they both went to college and, in fact, my father had a Master's Degree which he earned through the GI Bill after he returned from World War II. And so my mother, then, went to a business school and business college. So they had both achieved that and the expectation was that, of course, my brother and I would too. So, we were encouraged to do well and the encouragement was more about making the right selection for what we wanted to do post high school.

Blanche Touhill: Did your mother work as a secretary?

Barbara Wilkinson: She did work as a secretary and when I was in, I guess, the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, my brother would have been in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and the kids were pretty self-sufficient, she then went back to work full-time.

Blanche Touhill: And did she like it?

Barbara Wilkinson: She loved it and, in fact, as I look back at my mother, she could have been a business professional, a business executive and her people skills, her skills as basically an executive secretary led her to be the executive assistant for a school district superintendent, the secretary to the school board and ultimately all of the secretarial staff within the district reported to her. So, while at one point, I made the comment to my mother...and I'm very sad that I did this, but I was very young, I said to her, "Well, I don't want to be just a secretary; I want to do more than that" and it wasn't until then, you see the error of your ways as an adult that my mother really was demonstrating leadership...

Blanche Touhill: For that time.

Barbara Wilkinson: Absolutely. In fact, many of the people that she worked with said, "You may have the title of secretary but really you should be an associate superintendent."

Blanche Touhill: Well, we all know.

Barbara Wilkinson: But that was, again, that was the time and growing up, for my family, it was family and faith and community and the school formed the circle in which we developed our friendships and all of that was very important.

Blanche Touhill: When you played as a child, were you part of the team? Were you part of the group or did you lead the group?

Barbara Wilkinson: Both. There would be times when I would organize either a community game of kickball or whatever and a friend of mine and I would say, "Well, this is fun, just the two of us, but let's get everybody else and let's get them organized" and we would do those kinds of things. And again, there weren't as many structured opportunities then. It was pretty much, go to the playground or, at the end of the block or the vacant field next to the subdivision where we would go and play, ride bikes and organize softball games or baseball games or whatever it was that struck our fancy at the time.

Blanche Touhill: Did your parents tell you to be careful, there were dangers?

Barbara Wilkinson: You know, at that time, I think when they said "be careful," it was more about not doing something stupid that would cause a broken bone or an accident on a bicycle and it was actually a much freer time for children to



be able to play in the neighborhood and not have to worry about the predators that we deal with today when it comes to children's safety. So it was pretty much, "Be careful; have a good time and be home for dinner" or by the time the street lights came on at dark.

Blanche Touhill: Well, when you were in high school, did you think of going to Business College?

Barbara Wilkinson: I didn't. When I was in high school, I started taking French and foreign language in junior high school and continued all the way through high school and my parents said, "Well, you need to get your teaching degree or certificate so that you always have something to fall back on" because my desires were to use my foreign language skills in foreign service or in some sort of a government capacity. But I didn't really consider business school as something that I wanted to pursue at the time.

Blanche Touhill: So they were saying to you, "That's fine for you to pursue that, but as an insurance policy, you better get the teaching certificate so you can always double back and rely on teaching as a way to support yourself."

Barbara Wilkinson: Absolutely, and I must say that I grew up in a family with the tradition of, if the women worked, they were educators or secretaries and the men were the primary bread-winners in our family and I must add, though, I feel very lucky to have grown up in the age that I did when opportunities and the recognition that, yes, women are capable of performing many of the same jobs and tasks as men and, in fact, it was affirmative action that led to my change from being a French teacher to entering the business world.

Blanche Touhill: When you graduated from college, then you went into the teaching profession?

Barbara Wilkinson: I did. One note I think about college though...

Blanche Touhill: Where did you go to college?

Barbara Wilkinson: I graduated from high school here and was looking for a college program that was really strong in foreign language and, quite frankly, wasn't the University of Missouri, because, again, going to a high school with such a large graduating class, I didn't want to have my college experience, in my opinion, be with so many of the people that I was graduating from high

school with. So I wanted to break away from the Missouri mold, if you will, and so Indiana University was my college of choice. They had a wonderful, wonderful foreign language program. They also had an outstanding school of music and, with my interests and what I realized very quickly, my limited abilities in music; I thought that Indiana might be a place where I could pursue both jointly. It was within a reasonable distance from home, 250 miles or about four hours and at the time, their out-of-state tuition was affordable for my family and so I packed up and headed to Bloomington, Indiana and that Indiana University experience really started, I think, my recognition and the development of my self-confidence and where I really started to step out and say, I can do this and I took on leadership roles and responsibilities and I think it really took hold when I was in college.

Blanche Touhill: How did it take hold? Did you join a sorority or...

Barbara Wilkinson: I did.

Blanche Touhill: Did that help?

Barbara Wilkinson: That really created the smaller environment within the big university campus where it was expected and required that you become involved. So I did. It gave me the opportunity to pursue those different committees and group tasks or whatever, both within the sorority house, but also on campus. But then, they also, as an organization both on the Indiana University campus, but nationally, the expectation was that this was the opportunity to develop women and provide and create opportunities to become more well-rounded, to develop those leadership skills. It was expected that you would do well academically. That was one of the requirements to even become a member and that you would take a leadership role in whatever area your interest might be. So, I did that and I became the chair of an on-campus holiday fundraising event and it was successful and I enjoyed doing it and I enjoyed not only working with people, but also then doing the fundamental project management kinds of things, of, "Here's the schedule; here's the timeline; here's our goal. How are we collectively going to map out a plan to get there?" But then, also being the one to make sure that that happened. Then, in my second year of the sorority, I was elected the treasurer. Math had always been something that I did well in, something that I was interested in. In fact, I

took math in college to avoid physics and chemistry and it met my physical science requirements.

Blanche Touhill: When you were in high school...no, in college?

Barbara Wilkinson: No, in college too.

Blanche Touhill: So, in the math/science category, you took math.

Barbara Wilkinson: I did, I took math, and I've had great math teachers throughout my junior high and high school education and did well in it, so I thought, why not? Let's do something that I'm interested in and I know that I can do well in. So, I was elected treasurer. Now, at the time, what I didn't realize was that being elected treasurer was the stepping stone to becoming the sorority president. So, once again, I didn't see everything that everybody else recognized in me in terms of leadership abilities but once I learned that that was sort of the path and the expectation...

Blanche Touhill: And you did a good job.

Barbara Wilkinson: And I did a good job, and again, the preparation and the dedication and the commitment and that self-motivation of, if I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it well. I want the A. I don't want the B or the C, whether it be academic or in a task-oriented position or a treasurer position or whatever I was doing. I always wanted the A.

Blanche Touhill: So were you the president in the junior year or the senior year?

Barbara Wilkinson: Well, an interesting thing happened at the end of my sophomore year: Indiana University nearly quadrupled the out-of-state tuition and I didn't realize...or my parents didn't share with me once they had that information that that was going to be too much of a financial burden on my family. So at the end of my sophomore year, I completed all my finals and was going home and that was when my parents told me that I was not going to be able to return to Indiana and so, number one, it was devastating; number two, it was, so what are my options? And so over that summer, I went to the University of Missouri, met with the chair of the Foreign Language Department and luckily for me, all but one hour of PE credit transferred. So that sorority connection at Indiana paved the way for me to have an affiliation and a group that invited me to join the

sorority at the University of Missouri and I did become the president of that chapter, at the end of my junior year and into my senior year.

Blanche Touhill: That was remarkable.

Barbara Wilkinson: So that was really when...during those four years, that I maybe had stood a little taller and begun to step out to say, I can do this; I want to do this. Again, it was still a little bit of the always striving for the A and in that category, the A was being elected the president. But it was also my interest and ability to bring people together, to build relationships, to achieve a common goal and...

Blanche Touhill: ...to manage the timeline.

Barbara Wilkinson: ...to manage the timeline and make sure that, as a chapter, as a group, we met the expectations of the campus; we met the expectations of the national organization. And while, for many, many years, I regretted having to transfer schools, at the end of the day, I had a wonderful experience on both campuses. I fulfilled all of the educational requirements within four years so that I was able to graduate. I achieved my teaching certificate...

Blanche Touhill: Were you a French major?

Barbara Wilkinson: I was a French major, Italian minor. Had I stayed at Indiana, it was mapped out where I could have achieved a Spanish minor as well, in addition to getting the teaching certificate but there were some differences in requirements at MIZZOU and I had to take an additional five hours of biology or zoology. So some things changed but, bottom line, I was able to graduate successfully and achieve my academic goals and then say, okay, what next? What am I going to do now?

Blanche Touhill: So what did you do?

Barbara Wilkinson: The second semester of my sophomore year, I started the application process through the government, through the...

Blanche Touhill: You graduated, then you decided you'd try to go with the government?

Barbara Wilkinson: I did because my goal had been to use my foreign language skills in some form of foreign service, an interpreter, the sort of glamorous picture of being an interpreter in a foreign embassy or traveling the world and using

my foreign language skills in that way. So I made it through the first two screening steps.

Blanche Touhill: For civil service?

Barbara Wilkinson: For a civil service position and, in fact, was notified that my application had been funneled into an agency that I was totally unfamiliar with, the Defense Intelligence Agency. So, as well as the foreign embassies, of course, the military needed interpreters and so I was being reviewed for a position in the Defense Intelligence Agency. That was 1970, 1971, things heated up, not only in Vietnam but in Cambodia and so, at the end of my college career, there was a freeze on government hiring. So my application was put on hold as it were and as my parents told me, I had that teaching certificate to fall back on. So I started interviewing for teaching positions and, in fact, that fall, I started teaching French here in St. Louis in the Melville School District and at the time, they actually offered French to elementary students in the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades and it was about the same sort of schedule as you had art or music or PE. It was for 30 minutes three times a week. And so I taught French for two years in the Melville School District.

Blanche Touhill: Did you travel from school to school?

Barbara Wilkinson: I did, I was assigned to two schools and had probably four or five hundred students because that district at the time was growing and there were, in my 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes, anywhere from 30 to 35 students per class. Fortunately, the method used to teach French at that age was all spoken. There was no reading, no writing, no conjugating verbs or translating from French to English or English to French. The theory was that you learn the foreign language through speaking and associating words and sounds with objects and people and concepts. So, after the first day, everything was in French entirely. And at that age, when you're nine or ten or eleven, you don't worry so much about making a mistake in front of your peers and a lot of the activities were fun. They would act out the phrase or whatever the concept was that we were trying to teach at the time. So for, as I said, for two years I taught French.

Blanche Touhill: And then what happened?

Barbara Wilkinson: I confirmed what I knew when I was in college and that was that I really didn't want to be a teacher or an educator as a career and I had two

sorority sisters that had graduated, one ahead of me and one behind me at MIZZOU who had been hired by Southwestern Bell and in the early '70s, Southwestern Bell was part of the AT&T system and AT&T came under scrutiny and, in fact, signed a consent decree with the Department of Justice for gender discrimination. Men and women in jobs of equal duty and responsibility were being paid differently. So AT&T and all of the Bell system companies at the time then were aggressively recruiting women with college degrees and some level of experience or capability or interest, quite frankly, to become first level, entry level supervisors to balance the disparity and the discrepancy that had been a part of their past human resources procedures.

Blanche Touhill: Were they looking for school teachers?

Barbara Wilkinson: They weren't necessarily looking for teachers, I don't believe. Both of my friends that had already been hired, one happened to be a business education major; the other was a math major and so I don't know whether or not the education certificate and degree helped or not. I do know that, again, preparation meeting opportunity, I went and applied because my friends had said, "You would be a great candidate." So I went through the normal employment office and little did I know that there was a separate group of college recruiters that dealt with college graduates. So I went to the employment office and there was a basic math and English test that they gave to everyone. I took the test and they said, "We'll call you." Well, as it happened, a good friend of mine was a friend of the daughter of the state president of Southwestern Bell and she made a comment to her and said, "I have a friend who just applied. You might, if you would, mention it to your dad. I think she'd be a good candidate." Well, as it turned out, he called, he saw my test scores and he was the one that then got me into the college recruiters. Absent that connection, I don't know that that transfer from the employment office to the college recruiting office would have ever happened.

Blanche Touhill: So you became really a management...well, you were on the management track?

Barbara Wilkinson: I was on the management track.

Blanche Touhill: I think you're absolutely right. I don't think the two do match.

Barbara Wilkinson: And so, as such, I began my career, which at that time, I saw it as my job with Southwestern Bell. I was 23 years old. I walked into an accounting office as an accounting office supervisor with 15 women working for me, many of whom had more years of work experience than my 23 years of age. There wasn't a formal training program. You learned on the job and it was pretty much a sink or swim type of environment. Now, of course, my supervisor was very helpful but I was the boss, and of course, from their perspective, I was who knows how many newly inducted managers coming through and I'm sure that many of them in the coffee room or whatever said, "Oh, well, we've got another one." I was in the accounts payable office so the bills had to be paid; they had to be processed; the information prepared for the very early stages of computing and computer technology because, of course, the accounting functions were the first to be mechanized.

Blanche Touhill: How did you know what to do?

Barbara Wilkinson: Well, being the Bell system, there were accounting practices and procedures that dictated how...

Blanche Touhill: So you had a book of rules?

Barbara Wilkinson: I had a book of rules and so you made sure that the accounting clerks were following the rules and, in fact, they taught me what the rules were. We made sure that our schedules were met for the month-end journal closes and for year-end closes. That was how my career started.

Blanche Touhill: So you were really the woman who was going to make more money than they were?

Barbara Wilkinson: Oh, absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: They knew that you were on a different track than they were? They were probably going to spend their lives there and you were going to spend some time there and then move up?

Barbara Wilkinson: And then move on, and the history of those types of positions were that you stayed in that particular area as a supervisor for 12 to 18 months and then you were given the exposure and experience to move on and tackle another assignment.

Blanche Touhill: And they just threw you into all these places or did they prepare you?

Barbara Wilkinson: Well, the preparation came pretty much on the job. Now, as I said, there were lots of documented procedures and practices about how we do what we do and certainly it was to make sure that we were in compliance with generally accepted accounting principles with the FCC Rules and Regulations.

Blanche Touhill: I know that that's a lot to learn; it's a lot to learn.

Barbara Wilkinson: Well, and quite frankly, this goes back to my interest and ability in the math skills and the analytical skills because when offered the position, I was given a choice: I could be an accounting supervisor or a customer service supervisor, working with those clerks who took the new and change orders for telephone service. In my evaluation and assessment of the opportunities, I chose accounting because I'd always had an ability and an interest in math.

Blanche Touhill: So you were there for 18 months or something?

Barbara Wilkinson: I was there for 18 months, then put on a special assignment. Southwestern Bell had a small portion of the territory in Illinois so I became the project manager for the transfer of the accounting records to complete that sale from Southwestern Bell to Illinois Bell, which took about nine months and then I was ready for the next opportunity, which, of course, from my supervisor and the management leadership in the accounting department, was pretty well mapped out as to what was going to happen next.

Blanche Touhill: Your final job with Southwestern Bell was the foundation, weren't you the head of the foundation?

Barbara Wilkinson: I was. My final position was...the title was vice president, External Affairs for the State of Missouri. The most interesting part of that was managing the charitable giving and the foundation for the Missouri area.

Blanche Touhill: What else was in that portfolio?

Barbara Wilkinson: The rest of that position, I served as a chief of staff for the president.

Blanche Touhill: Which president?

Barbara Wilkinson: When I took the position, it was Priscilla Hill Ardoine, followed by Jan Newton. So that position then had accountability for budgets and human



resources responsibilities, interaction with the employee community, as well as the external community because the president, with being here in St. Louis, served on the major boards: United Way; Civil Progress; the St. Louis Symphony. And so in my role as the vice president, I took on some of the secondary, in many ways no less important, but what were considered the second tier boards, as well as other officers and executives in the St. Louis area.

Blanche Touhill: What boards? Give me an example of the boards you served on.

Barbara Wilkinson: For example, Southwestern Bell, SBC at that time, was a big supporter of the Variety Club. So I served on that. I also had the honor of serving on the Chancellor's Council for the University of Missouri-St. Louis; the Asthma and Allergy Foundation board; Girls Incorporated; the Cooperating School Districts, Character Plus, Character Education Executive Advisory Board. We were also big supporters then of Junior Achievement. So there were those types of more local, community-based boards that I had the opportunity to participate in.

Blanche Touhill: But the chief of staff job must have been an interesting job.

Barbara Wilkinson: It was an incredibly interesting job because that really...and little did I know it at the time when I accepted it...it paved the way for my transition into community service and active engagement in the St. Louis non-profit community, which is what I have chosen as now the next chapter of my life.

Blanche Touhill: How was it to run the foundation?

Barbara Wilkinson: It was an interesting assignment. It gave me insight into the wonderful organizations that are doing tremendous work.

Blanche Touhill: So that's more than non-profit really?

Barbara Wilkinson: That's the non-profit side.

Blanche Touhill: Did you have to relate to the state legislature in that job?

Barbara Wilkinson: I did not in that job because we had another senior level manager that worked with both the legislature as well as the Missouri Public Service Commission.

Blanche Touhill: When you went in to this managerial track, did you know the other people who were starting at the same time you were?

Barbara Wilkinson: No, I didn't.

Blanche Touhill: So you don't know how many of them stayed.

Barbara Wilkinson: No, I don't. I do know that, of the ones that I got to know here in the Missouri area, all but one made their career with the company and left with anywhere from 25 to 35 years of service and that was the really compelling part about being a part of a large corporation at the time. Today, to have different opportunities and experiences in different disciplines, many times you have to change companies. I started as an accounting supervisor. I then went to work on developing the computer system that became the accounts payable system. Then I went through the 1984 divestiture and break-up of the Bell System which gave me then the opportunity to become a part of the first investor relations staff of Southwestern Bell Corporation and, of all the jobs that I had, that was the one, I think, that was the most interesting and the most educational for me because all of a sudden, I was talking about my company in front of the Wall Street analysts and investors that were making the buy/hold/sell decisions on SBC stock. It exposed me to senior management at a middle management level which virtually few other positions within the company did. I was able to travel with the CEO and the CFO, host meetings where they were, of course, the spokesperson about the strategy for the company, the challenges, the growth opportunities. But, to be a part of many of those high level discussions and presentations...

Blanche Touhill: ...and decisions.

Barbara Wilkinson: ...and decision making that it was unique within that position. From there I went into marketing, always an area that I had thought I would have some interest in and there was an opportunity then to become a part of the consumer marketing team and, again, preparation, I spent a week at the Kellogg Management School at Northwestern University with a week-long, very intensive course led by Dr. Phil Kotler who was considered to be the father of, then, modern marketing theory and practice and very quickly got what I call my MBA in marketing, which gave me the theoretical side to then be able to come back and apply to the transition from taking phone orders to really marketing and dealing with, what are

the customer needs and how do we, as a company, compete and meet those customer needs as competition was heating up in the telecommunications industry.

Blanche Touhill: As you worked for Southwestern Bell, did you feel there was a salary discrepancy?

Barbara Wilkinson: I believe that there still is, not so much at Southwestern Bell but I think generally. We went through a time in the '70s, with marketing and advertising taglines "You've come a long way, baby," recognizing that women were progressing and achieving and making their way, in the business world in particular.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, and at Southwestern Bell.

Barbara Wilkinson: And at Southwestern Bell.

Blanche Touhill: They had a lot of women working in the actual running of...servicing but they didn't have many in the management.

Barbara Wilkinson: Exactly, and I think that affirmative action opportunity that created my job and career path, the company also invested, and still continues to invest, in employee development and development of leadership skills and the application of whatever the current trend in business theory and management theory is to make sure that they have the most competent and capable workforce. So while there still is only one woman in the company at that direct report to the chairman level, there are more and more women underneath that at higher levels. We've heard about the glass ceiling and when you look at the statistics, while women represent more than 50% of the workforce, we still have to strive to have the preparation and be the ones that are the successful candidates to make sure that those numbers where it's less than 25% of women on corporate boards and in the CEO suite improve.

Blanche Touhill: How many women are on the...what is it, AT&T now...board?

Barbara Wilkinson: On the board, there are a number of women. I don't know exactly how many but even back in the 1990's, there was a concerted effort and, in fact, there were some wonderful women that were added to the SBC board and I think that SBC/AT&T has always been at the forefront of

investing in and developing the potential and creating opportunities for women to move into the most senior levels of management.

Blanche Touhill: I want to change the subject just a bit: If you had been born 50 years earlier, what do you think your life would have been like?

Barbara Wilkinson: That is a really interesting question. I think about 50 years earlier would have been at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the time when my grandmother and then later on, my mother grew up, where the expectations as well as the opportunities for women were around the home. I would hope that the things that I learned about myself would still have come through, that I would have been able to step out and maybe even be an active participant in the women's right to vote movement, or things that came later on around the '50s and '60s because, as I look back at the women in my family, they were all dedicated, first and foremost, to their home and their family, but they were all very competent and capable women that found ways to make a difference and to step out and do things outside the home, whether it be in their church community, in their neighborhood community, and I think that that is most definitely a part of who I am and that I would have had that same experience. I just hope that my competitive spirit and my desire to achieve the A and be as important a contributor as I could possibly be would have led me to do some of those kinds of things.

Blanche Touhill: And did you get an award or awards that you really are especially proud of you have received?

Barbara Wilkinson: There are two that come to mind. Every year the YWCA recognizes women in the workforce, be it business, education, the arts, the public and private sector and toward the end of my career, the company recognized and nominated me for one of those awards in business leadership and as I sat on the podium at that luncheon in a ballroom filled with about 1,000 people, I felt so fortunate and honored to be among what was my peer group for induction into the Academy of Leaders at the YWCA.

Blanche Touhill: I think the Y deserves a lot of credit for starting that luncheon and those awards.

Barbara Wilkinson: I do, too.

Blanche Touhill: Prior to that time, it was Women of Distinction and they were really volunteers but the Y said there are women working and professional people and they deserve to be recognized too. I always thought they were very clever when they started that and it is a huge, huge event.

Barbara Wilkinson: It is, and really represents, I think, the YWCA very well, whose mission is empowering women and eliminating racism and just about every year there has been a Racial Justice Award...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, indeed.

Barbara Wilkinson: ...that has recognized women in our community who have done outstanding things. The second award is one that I received back in 1993 or '94 and, as I mentioned earlier, I've always had the competitive spirit and organized games or whatever, but also played in organized softball, both as a child and then as an adult. And so I had the opportunity to start coaching a team of young girls. They started with me when they were maybe eight or nine years old and by the time they got to be 12 or 13, it was getting time where those who were really serious wanted to go on and play on teams that played more games and traveled. But my goal was to show young girls that not all coaches are your dads or men and that women can lead and be a part of sports the same way that men can, and for them to have a good experience of playing on the part of a team, having an opportunity to participate to find out what they were good at or not so good at. And so I think it was in 1993, my team knew it, everybody knew it but me, that at the end of year celebration and awards ceremony, I was named Softball Coach of the Year and, to this day, I think that was as proud a moment as my recognition with the YWCA because I was doing what I love to do and hopefully that was showing young girls that you can do things that you might have even thought were open to you and to show them that women were and are strong and capable leaders, coaches, anything that you want to be.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk about your life after you retired from Southwestern Bell?

Barbara Wilkinson: Sure. Actually, the retirement opportunity came earlier than what I had anticipated and the company had gone through several different mergers and acquisitions. There were opportunities to reduce middle and senior management levels through an enhanced pension retirement offer. At the time, I was probably five or six years away from my personal goal for

retirement and the company made that happen much more quickly than I thought. So, in my early 50's, I was able to leave the work environment and pursue whatever I chose to be the next chapter.

Blanche Touhill: How many years had you worked for SBC?

Barbara Wilkinson: Twenty-eight years. So, in 2001, I ended my career with SBC and, because of the position that I held at the time, being involved in the community, serving on non-profit boards in the community, I was able to continue that board service, number one, until the company was able to find a company replacement for that position, but it also gave me an opportunity to follow in those areas where I knew I wanted to give and participate as time went on. And my interest, because of the affirmative action opportunity that opened the door for me at Southwestern Bell, making sure that young women and girls were prepared and ready, both from an educational standpoint as well as just personal life skills development and knowledge, has always been a passion of mine, and so I chose to stay with an organization focused on young women, as well as education, which has always been an important part of my life. So, staying involved with education, K-12 education and doing whatever I could to support the community, to support, again, opportunities for children and opportunities for those who might not otherwise have the things and experience and encouragement that I had as a child and young adult growing up. So, I stayed on, as I said, a couple of non-profit boards in organizations here. My business experience has served me well, both from a financial standpoint, a leadership standpoint, project management skills and basically in the non-profit arena, you may be considered a non-profit and not concerned about making a profit, but it's still the same business and marketing applications that I had from my 28 years with SBC. So that experience has served me well and I think has enabled me to make contributions to the organizations.

Blanche Touhill: What organizations?

Barbara Wilkinson: Girls Incorporated is one that I have been involved with since even before I left SBC. The mission of the organization is to encourage all girls to be strong, smart and bold. The affiliates across the United States typically serve under resourced, at-risk kids and our goal is very simple: Stay in school; complete your education; be prepared so that you can be your own boss, your own CEO, and for many of these children, opportunities

for college or post-K-12 education aren't going to come readily. So one of the key messages that we have is, you do well in school. You make sure that you're prepared to go to junior college, to college or to a job skills training program and we will make sure or we will do everything that we can to help you achieve those goals.

Blanche Touhill: Do you succeed in that?

Barbara Wilkinson: I believe that we do. Our focus recently has been through community partnerships to bring the math, the science, the technology, the computer, the engineering skills, the stem disciplines down to levels where we have 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders who are doing fundamental coding, who are learning that they can make a robot move, talk, respond and they consider it to be fun. I always say if I have trouble with my technology at home, I'm better served by calling an 11 or 12-year-old because they're not intimidated. They hit the buttons and do whatever it takes and just figure it out. So just figuring it out and stepping up and being involved.

Blanche Touhill: And what other boards are you on?

Barbara Wilkinson: The other one that I particularly am fond of is with the cooperating school districts, the Character Education/Character Plus initiative because developing good citizens, caring and compassion individuals, the development of characters is as much a part of education as the A,B,C's and the 1+1's. So the programs that have been adopted and incorporated, not only into schools in the St. Louis community, but nationally, I think are incredibly important and so education, and particularly the focus on young women, is where I'm spending my time post-retirement.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I think our time is just about up. Is there any other little thing that you just want to comment about your life after retirement?

Barbara Wilkinson: There are so many things that you learn along the way and so many people that create opportunities and influences and things that you carry with you and I think one of those that was summed up quite nicely by Maya Angelou is her comment or observation that people won't remember what you say; people probably won't remember what you do, but what they will remember is how you made them feel. And the saying and doing become a part of how you make people feel, but I think if we

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could all keep that in mind, and certainly I try to in every interaction that I have, as a board member, as an adult to child sort of relationship, I think it's real important that we...or at least that I always walk away feeling that maybe somebody had a smile on their face that they didn't have. Maybe I offered them an opportunity to laugh. Certainly I have many opportunities to laugh at myself and just that we all feel that we've walked away better people from having whatever interaction we had.

Blanche Touhill: Thank you very much.